

Preventing State Collapse in Syria

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The situation in Syria following the siege and battle for Aleppo remains “catastrophic,” according to the United Nations (UN), and the UN General Assembly in December 2016 empowered a new, independent panel to investigate and prosecute possible war crimes.¹ While the international community has lamented the human costs of the war, a political solution to its end has been elusive.

U.S. priorities in the war have included the departure of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and, more pressingly, the defeat of the Islamic State and al Qaeda and its affiliates.² The Obama administration has also sought to put in place “basic requirements” for a postconflict transition, including preservation of state institutions.³

This Perspective asks how U.S. policies can create the best possible conditions for a postconflict transition in Syria that would defeat terrorist groups and preserve Syrian state institutions, especially in the absence of a regional consensus to end the war. Our assessment suggests that these objectives are best served by partner-

ing with Russia, working through the UN Security Council, and undertaking postconflict stabilization policies that support centralized Syrian state institutions.

Lessons from recent conflicts, including U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, suggest that postconflict security, governance, and reconstruction in Syria will require centralized state authority. A collapsed or fractured state would contribute to further instability and radicalization in Syria, its neighbors, and the wider region.⁴ The longer the war goes on, the higher the probability of state collapse, fragmentation, endemic terrorism, and continued refugee flows.

The methodology of this Perspective is informed by an extensive review of literature by the RAND Corporation and other organizations about civil wars, insurgencies, interventions, and postconflict reconstruction, with references to historical trends and lessons learned from these cases for comparison with Syria; primary, secondary, and public sources on Syria, including UN and U.S. gov-

ernment reports, statements by officials, and press accounts, as well as many classic and standard works on Syrian politics, history, and culture; and informal, unstructured discussions with leading experts and practitioners on Syria and U.S. policy toward the Middle East.

The Perspective is divided into two parts. The first section assesses the threat from Syria and what to do about it, including the advantages of partnering with Russia and working through the UN Security Council, especially in the absence of a regional consensus on ending the war. Such a partnership will allow a UN Security Council mandate for postconflict transition, as well as allow the potential for enhanced security coordination against terrorist groups. The second section makes the case for maintaining a mostly centralized approach to postconflict governance, reconstruction, and security in Syria and should be read as an alternative to policy recommendations suggesting decentralization, partition, or a disproportionate emphasis on local governance. The conclusion offers five recommendations for U.S. policy in Syria.

The Syrian Threat

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and are directly responsible for or inspire attacks on the United States and its allies. The Islamic State and al Qaeda expanded their international terrorist networks as a direct result of the wars in Syria and Iraq, even as the Islamic State, in particular, began in 2015 to lose significant territory and the flow of foreign fighters into the countries began to decline.⁵ The Islamic State expanded its operations in Afghanistan, Libya, Tunisia, and Turkey in 2015, and its supporters claimed responsibility for attacks in Bangladesh, Belgium, France, Indonesia, Turkey, the United States, and Yemen in 2016.⁶ Also in 2016, violent Sunni extremists have “more groups, members, and safe havens than at any other point in history,” and the Islamic State “has become the preeminent terrorist threat because of its self-described caliphate in Syria and Iraq, its branches and emerging branches in other countries, and its increasing ability to direct and inspire attacks against a wide range of targets around the world.”⁷ To date, U.S. efforts “have not reduced [the Islamic State’s] terrorism capability and global reach.”⁸

For a time, the emphasis on the Islamic State may have obscured the threat from al Qaeda in Syria. By June 2016, the Obama administration considered Jabhat al-Nusra to be al Qaeda’s largest formal affiliate in that country.⁹ Although Nusra recast itself as the “Syrian Conquest Front” in July 2016, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said that “Nusrah is al-Qaida, and no name change by Nusrah hides what Nusrah really is and tries to do.”¹⁰ The trend toward new names and alliances among al Qaeda and affiliated groups is not new.¹¹ A chronically failing or failed state in Syria would be vulnerable to continued influence of and penetration by terrorist, Salafi, and jihadist groups backed by outside powers.

The Assad Workaround

One strategy for reducing the threat of greater Islamic State and al Qaeda influence, as well as planning for postconflict governance in Syria, would be to emulate U.S. strategies used against numerous past insurgencies and subnational terrorist groups, including in Iraq and Afghanistan. This approach focuses on ensuring state stability by increasing the capacity of the state institutions to defeat terrorists, undertaking steps toward national reconciliation, and implementing political reform, supported by an international coalition and regional partners.¹² In short, the strategy would be to maintain, stabilize, and strengthen what remains of state institutions to defeat the terrorists and prevent state collapse.

Complicating this approach, however, is the U.S. policy of seeking Assad's transition from power. The United States has always had poor relations with Syria, especially after Assad took over the presidency upon his father's death in 2000.¹³ His government's response to the popular Syrian uprisings in 2011 was brutal and his conduct of the war a litany of potential war crimes.¹⁴ Assad's departure has been a hard and fast position for the Obama administration, albeit without a time frame, and a priority of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, as well as a wide range of Syrian opposition groups.¹⁵

The emphasis on both regime change and the defeat of terrorist groups seeking to overthrow the Syrian government has only served to prolong the war. They are, in the end, probably irreconcilable objectives, absent a level of intervention or escalation that has not been proposed. Regime change can lead to state collapse, which, in turn, can lead to a failed or chronically failing state and further

expansion of ungoverned spaces where terrorist groups thrive, as happened in Iraq and Libya and as is occurring in Syria.¹⁶

Lack of a Regional Consensus

While many key U.S. regional partners are members of the anti-Islamic State coalition and have helped the United States fight al Qaeda, they also oppose Assad, resulting in a difference of priorities and the absence of a regional consensus. The blending of Syrian armed opposition groups with Nusra fighters, including in Aleppo, has further complicated diplomatic efforts to end the war.¹⁷

Saudi Arabia, for example, has been a critical U.S. partner in fighting terrorism against al Qaeda and the Islamic State, both of which have claimed responsibility for attacks in the Kingdom. But Riyadh also views Syria as a battlefield in its sectarian proxy war with Iran, which Riyadh considers as a leading state sponsor of terrorism and the chief threat to regional stability.¹⁸ Saudi anxiety about Iran's regional intentions increased following the July 2015 signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which provided some sanctions relief in exchange for Iran's acceptance of restrictions on its nuclear program.

Turkey has increasingly suffered from Islamic State terrorism, but its top priority in Syria is related to its own Kurdish question. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan considers the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) of Syria and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), as linked to the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is designated a terrorist organization in both Turkey and the United States. The PKK and the Turkish military are engaged in a civil war in southeastern Turkey, with the Erdogan government seeking to thwart the PYD's consolidation of territory along the Turkish-Syrian border.

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The United States and Turkey have struggled to mask their differences in Syria. The United States considers the YPG among its most effective on-the-ground partners in fighting the Islamic State. For Turkey, the YPG is an enemy and the primary target of its military operations in Syria. It took months of arduous negotiations before Ankara granted the United States permission in July 2015 to conduct air attacks on the Islamic State from its Incirlik Air Base.¹⁹

Iran, for its part, is fully committed to the defense and survival of the Syrian government. Since the Arab uprisings of 2011, Iran has strengthened its ties to Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria through its proxy, Hezbollah. Iran has also accused Saudi Arabia of being the key driver of Wahhabi extremism linked to al Qaeda, its affiliates, and the Taliban.²⁰

Summarizing U.S. frustrations about the lack of a regional consensus, Vice President Joseph Biden said that, in trying to stem the flow of foreign fighters to Syria, “our biggest problem is our allies,” and that some U.S. regional partners

were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-[Shiite] war [that they] poured hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad—except that the people who were being supplied were [Jabhat] al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.²¹

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The Russian Option

Given the absence of a regional consensus and the seeming intractability of the war, the United States, especially since fall 2015, has explored enhanced cooperation with Russia to address the conflict in Syria. The siege of Aleppo by Russian- and Iranian-backed Syrian forces followed the collapse of U.S.-Russian negotiations on enhanced military and security cooperation in September 2016. Although President Barack Obama blamed Iran, Russia, and Syria for the brutality in Aleppo, his administration nonetheless continued its efforts to work with Russia and at the UN to facilitate humanitarian assistance and to resurrect talks toward a political settlement.²³ On November 14, 2016, U.S. President-elect Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed possible U.S.-Russian collaboration against terrorists and extremists in Syria, according to a Kremlin statement.²⁴

The Russian position on Syria has been consistent from the start of the uprising.²⁵ Putin explained that destroying the “legitimate government” in Syria would lead to chaos and instability, as happened in Iraq and Libya, adding that

[t]here is no other way to settle the Syrian conflict other than by strengthening the existing legitimate government agencies, support them in their fight against terrorism and, of course, at the same time encourage them to start a positive dialogue with the “healthy” part of the opposition and launch political transformations.²⁶

Putin also sought to secure the Russian naval facility in Tartus, Syria, and, over the course of the war, has expanded his country's military presence to include an air base at Khmeimim. Putin's approach to Syria could be understood as both defensive and opportunistic, but also unwavering in his support for the Syrian government. Syria has been a Russian ally for decades, and the result of the UN-backed intervention in Libya led Putin not to allow a repeat outcome in Syria. Russia also prioritizes threats from terrorists, especially given the connections between radical Chechen groups and foreign fighters operating in Syria.²⁷

Russia escalated its military support for the Syrian government in September 2015, providing air support for Syrian ground troops and thus tipping the balance of forces in the regime's favor. In October 2015, the United States and Russia resumed military-to-military consultations, which had been suspended following Russia's annexation of Crimea. Shortly after, Washington and Moscow signed a memorandum of understanding "to minimize the risk of inflight incidents among coalition and Russian aircraft" but not "establish[ing] zones of cooperation [or] intelligence sharing . . . in Syria."²⁸

Nonetheless, U.S.-Russian diplomacy picked up after the Russian military intervention. Washington and Moscow convened what became known as the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in late 2015, including Iranian, Saudi, and Turkish participation and bringing together all regional parties for the first time. This initiative led to unanimous passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 in December 2015, which launched the most recent round of UN-mediated intra-Syrian talks and led to the cessation of hostilities.²⁹ While imperfect, the February 2016 cessation of hostilities resulting from this initiative reduced violence, allowed

some humanitarian relief, and enabled a resumption of UN-sponsored peace talks.³⁰

A Risky Plan B

There is an alternative approach to Syria that argues that the United States should interpret Russian and Iranian actions in support of Assad as hostile to U.S. interests. This view holds that the United States should consider a plan B to pressure Russia and Iran to negotiate Assad's ouster by increasing military support for "moderate" Syrian opposition forces, establishing a "no-fly" or "safe" zone over northern Syria, or perhaps employing military strikes against the Syrian government.³¹ It also holds that Washington should "impose real costs on Russia for its destabilizing behavior"³² and "confront Iranian power and designs in the region, rather than acquiescing to them."³³ A display of U.S. resolve against Assad and Iran would supposedly motivate Arab partners of the United States to step up in battling the Islamic State.³⁴

This approach assumes that the risks of further destabilizing the Syrian government and undermining the U.S.-Russia partnership are outweighed by the presumed benefits of Russia and Iran being more accommodating on Assad's departure after a U.S. display of force. This is a weighty and uncertain assumption, as escalation could force Assad and his backers to harden their positions while undermining Syrian state institutions and weakening the focus on terrorist groups. Such a plan also fails to address the relationship between some Syrian opposition forces and the Syrian Conquest Front, as well as Turkey's reservations about the Syrian Democratic Forces, the most effective U.S.-backed armed group in Syria.³⁵

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Dealing with Assad

A deal on Assad, if one is feasible, would require the United States and its Middle East allies to reach some form of accommodation with Russia and Iran in Syria. Our assessment is that Assad's departure might indeed facilitate Syria's postconflict stability, but would be better to occur when state institutions are relatively stable and as the result of negotiations, not an escalation of conflict.

The 2012 Geneva Communique of the UN-mediated "Action Group for Syria" remains the diplomatic foundation for a political transition in Syria, including the establishment of a "transitional governing body [with] full executive powers" and the possible inclusion of "members of the present government and the opposition and other groups . . . formed on the basis of mutual consent," a "review of the constitutional order and the legal system" subject to "popular approval," and "free and fair multi-party elections."³⁶ UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which passed unanimously in late 2015, similarly supports

a Syrian-led political process that is facilitated by the United Nations [that] establishes credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance and sets a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution, and further expresses its support for free and fair elections . . . administered under supervision of the United Nations . . . with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate.³⁷

The phrase "mutual consent" seems to grant the parties to the negotiations (which would not include Nusra and the Islamic State) a veto on the composition of a transitional government. Both the Assad government and many of the opposition forces are locked into positions that hinder negotiations. Assad considers most armed opposition groups and insurgent forces to be terrorists. Similarly, many opposition groups oppose any role for Assad in a transitional government.³⁸ Further complicating the pursuit of "mutual consent" are those Syrians—including the Alawi, Christian, and other minority communities—who associate Assad's presence with their survival.³⁹

The United States has conveyed both flexibility and ambiguity on Assad's role in a transition but certainty that Assad should not be part of a post-transition government. As Secretary Kerry has said, "it is not clear that [Assad] would have to, quote, 'go,' if there was clarity with respect to what his future might or might not be."⁴⁰

Russia and Iran have signaled that their commitments to Assad, while strong for now, may not be indefinite. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that "[he] did not say that Assad has to go or that Assad has to stay. [He] said that Assad's destiny should be decided by the Syrian people."⁴¹ Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif similarly remarked that

[w]e are against people and governments outside Syria setting pre-conditions for a political solution in Syria. One way or another, we're not setting any preconditions. We believe that's not our job. We believe we should leave it to the Syrians to decide.⁴²

A post-Assad leader would need to be acceptable to the current regime and to the relevant outside powers, especially Russia and Iran, and at least minimally acceptable to the opposition and its

regional backers.⁴³ There are already advanced discussions among Americans, Iranians, Russians, Syrians, and other engaged parties about an eventual devolution of presidential powers under a new Syrian constitution.⁴⁴

In October 2015, Zarif said that Iran’s “four-point plan” for Syria—including a national unity government, counterterrorism, constitutional reform, and new governmental structures based on these constitutional changes—had “evolved” to include such principles as “sovereignty, territorial integrity, fighting extremism, sectarianism, and non-interference in the internal affairs of Syria, a political solution, respect for minority rights, human rights.”⁴⁵ In response, Secretary Kerry said that Iran’s plan “is very close to what Geneva has been trying to achieve.”⁴⁶

Saudi interests regarding a post-Assad government are less clear cut, with some uncertainty about whether the Kingdom is more focused on removing Assad from power or removing Iranian influence from the country altogether. If Saudi interests in removing Iranian influence are preeminent, then the prospects for a regional solution are reduced as Iran is fully invested in the Syrian government’s survival.

Whether Assad remains may depend first on a new Syrian constitution, as well as on negotiations with Russia and Iran. While this negotiation and process would depend on several unknowns, our point is that the process is best handled through negotiations with the relevant powers, not through military actions that further destabilize state institutions.

A UN Security Council Mandate

The absence of a regional consensus on Syria undermines not only U.S. counterterrorism strategy, but also planning for postconflict

Syria. Therefore, the best option for the United States is through diplomatic and security collaboration with Russia and, by extension, the UN Security Council. U.S.-Russian cooperation on Syria since late 2015 has led to a fragile diplomatic progress, a shaky cessation of hostilities, and delivery of humanitarian aid to some besieged areas. These efforts have not ended the war, defeated the Islamic State, or brought about a political transition. But they have allowed a Security Council imprimatur that should benefit postconflict stabilization, especially given the differing priorities of the regional parties. U.S.-Russian diplomacy will be instrumental in determining Assad’s future in a way that does not further destabilize state structures. This approach allows the United States to sidestep the immediate question of what should be done with Assad and focus on its top priority, the defeat of the Islamic State and the Syrian Conquest Front.

Postconflict stabilization and reconstruction will, however, be impossible if neighboring states are not party to the process.⁴⁷ While the United States and Russia can spark UN Security Council action on Syria, both also have a veto. The United States might be able to use that leverage to encourage, at the appropriate time, Russia to support Assad’s transition from power to facilitate postconflict security assistance.⁴⁸

The Case for the Syrian State

Postconflict stabilization will be unlikely if Syria is subject to division or partition. Syria’s relatively strong national identity and experience of centralized authority reinforce the prospects for a unified state. The 2011 Arab Spring demonstrations reflected a sense of Syrian unity, not division, with people from differing regions, ethnicities,

religions, and socioeconomic status mobilizing to support reform and change.

Stability in postconflict Syria will depend on strengthening the Syrian state and its related institutions. Empowering substate structures at the expense of the state, even under the guise of “local governance” or “decentralization,” would be misguided, given Syria’s political culture and history.⁴⁹

Syrian national identity is state centered and surprisingly well developed historically, despite the country’s postcolonial experience and authoritarian governance. Diverse communities—Christians, Kurds, Muslims, and Yazidis—have historically lived together in Syria. Some regions and communities have a strong ethnic identification, but in most, there is a sense of shared community and identity.⁵⁰ While there has been violence between different groups over time, many of these conflicts were local political battles that did not lead to identity-based mobilization.⁵¹

The primary population divides in Syria originally were not confessional or ethnic but socioeconomic: between rich and poor, as well as between urban and rural. To be from Damascus or Aleppo or the countryside has always been more central than religion or ethnicity to identity in Syria.⁵² Syrian independence and the early Ba’ath movement eclipsed these identity lines as the population unified behind statism and socialism. To be Syrian began to mean

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something more. And although nationalism became somewhat strained and top-down after 1970, Syrians continued to have a strong national identity.

There is a modern legacy of Alawi privilege, but this should not be overplayed into a dominant trend or tradition of sectarianism. During the Ottoman rule of the Levant, Arab Sunni communities were generally favored relative to Alawis. The Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon brought the Alawis into nascent colonial and state structures, and Alawis served in the Troupes spéciales du Levant under French officers and gained prominence among Syrian military officers.⁵³ This created some sense of grievance against Alawis, although a recent study observes that this sect-oriented frustration was only a tangential motivation of Syrian nationalist forces during the Great Revolt (1925–1927).⁵⁴ The original Ba’ath movement touted inclusivity and appealed to broad swathes of the population. It was not until former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad’s rise to power in 1970 that resentment began to develop against the Alawis in particular, and this was less to do with a hatred of sect as displeasure from the family’s growing monopoly on power. Indeed,

although it is clear that [Hafez al-Assad], in his pursuit of safety or firmness of tenure, deem[ed] it prudent to have at the core of his power base ‘Alawis or kinsmen, it would be going too far to infer that he [was] sectarian or tribal in his outlook or line of conduct. There is little evidence that the majority of his coreligionists or fellow tribesmen [enjoyed] more of the comforts of life or suffer[ed] less from the stresses of fortune than the majority of the Syrian people.⁵⁵

Confessionalism has been an expedient way to stabilize social, economic, and political networks but has not been all consuming as civil society and business networks often developed beyond and

across these lines. The foundations of dissent at the turn of the 21st century were rooted in pro-civil society organizations advocating reform and the rule of law, rather than sectarian armed groups. Even the Muslim Brotherhood had de-emphasized sectarian loyalties in favor of human rights and rule of law.⁵⁶

A tradition of centralized governance accompanied the evolution of Syrian nationalism. Despite the Assad regime's authoritarian practices and the excesses of the government's security services, early Ba'ath governance was often effective in the development and expansion of infrastructure and social services. Over time, the government became increasingly riddled with corruption, long-running patronage networks, and, especially since Bashar al-Assad assumed the presidency in 2000, increasing levels of crony capitalism.⁵⁷

Assad's economic record prior to the uprising of 2011 was mixed, but comparable with regional standards, despite the burdens of authoritarianism, corruption, and patronage. Average growth of annual gross domestic product (GDP) between 2005 and 2009 was just less than 5 percent, close to that of other Middle East countries.⁵⁸ In 2009, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) commended Syria's structural reforms to mitigate the impact of the global financial crisis and projected growth of more than 5 percent in the coming years. Assad himself had sought to streamline the bureaucracy and decisionmaking in what he termed "administrative reform," a political complement to the economic reforms recommended by the IMF.⁵⁹ These reforms reduced subsidies and government benefits as Syrians struggled to weather not just the global financial crisis, but also a massive drought, which contributed to the social, economic, and political agitation leading to the 2011 uprisings.⁶⁰

Several lessons from Syria's tradition and experiences of nationalism and centralized governance can inform planning for postconflict Syria. First, postconflict governance structures should not reinforce subnational identities or divisions of ethnicity, sect, or geography. The ISSG, the UN Security Council, and all of the non-Kurdish Syrian parties involved in the UN-mediated talks have called for Syria's unity and rejected the country's division.⁶¹ In its first meeting in October 2015, the ISSG participants agreed that "Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and secular character are fundamental."⁶² UN Security Council Resolution 2254 reasserted the ISSG "commitments to Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and non-sectarian character."⁶³ The UN Special Envoy for the intra-Syrian negotiations through April 2016 noted among the "commonalities" shared by the Syrian government and the opposition was a commitment to "Syria's independence, territorial integrity and unity in accordance with the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs."⁶⁴ The United States supports a "united Syria."⁶⁵ Except for the PYD, no Syrian party is calling for a division of the country.

Second, the need for centralized state authority does not necessarily contradict constitutional reforms to limit the power of the Syrian presidency or empower local authorities and legislative bodies.⁶⁶ Such reform efforts are not the same as plans to build up governance from so-called liberated areas of Syria.⁶⁷ It is unclear whether these liberated areas, absent connections with centralized state institutions, would have the potential for even the most rudimentary security, economic, or trade capabilities to survive, especially in a postconflict environment, given the roles of regional powers, the presence of armed groups, and uncertain ties with Damascus.

Third, Syria's postconflict transition should avoid mistakes made in Iraq, such as the excesses of de-Ba'athification or a preoccupation with devolution of state authority. There should be no widespread purge of state bureaucrats in Syria—only those implicated in the crimes of the security services. Most analysts agree that rapidly removing all Ba'ath officials in Iraq—which had similar political and cultural views toward governance—proved detrimental, if not disastrous, to the country's ability to function administratively and politically. Lessons learned from Iraq suggest that a comprehensive vetting program is a far better solution than a blanket policy of ousters at lower levels.⁶⁸

Local authority in postconflict Syria is best based on pre-existing administrative boundaries of provinces and urban areas rather than battle lines or sectarian identities, which would be self-defeating. Iraq and Lebanon are examples of neighboring states where excessive formalizing of ethnic and religious identities helped to create weak states prone to cyclical violence and instability and led to the subsequent rise of armed groups and militias. Centralization—that is, authority and services from the central state—is closely aligned with what the local population will likely expect from the government. There is no experience of “local authority” in Syria, absent at least some linkages to Damascus, and it is probably difficult, if not impossible, to assess the experience of local governance in liberated areas during the war.⁶⁹ While there will be a need to integrate some of the “opposition” forces into Syrian governance and security structures, not all of the armed groups in those areas should be characterized as “liberators” or as having the consent of those they govern, even if they enjoy support from regional powers friendly to the United States.⁷⁰

Rebuilding the Syrian State

Beyond the demands of governance, rebuilding Syria's economy and infrastructure will also require a centralized governing authority. To date, the cost of the war is estimated to be at least \$270 billion, and the reconstruction bill will likely exceed \$300 billion.⁷¹

The economic and human toll of the war has been daunting. At least 400,000 have been killed and more than 840,000 injured.⁷² Life expectancy in Syria has dropped from 79.5 years in 2010 to 55.7 years in 2014. More than 80 percent of Syrians live in poverty, with most of these living in extreme poverty. Unemployment is estimated at 58 percent, and nearly 3 million job opportunities have been lost.⁷³ GDP decreased an average of more than 15 percent from 2011 to 2014, in part because daily oil production dropped from 368,000 barrels in 2010 to 40,000 barrels in 2015.⁷⁴ Inflation averaged 51 percent annually from 2012 to 2015, and the Syrian pound has depreciated by 80 percent since the start of the war.⁷⁵ Education is in a “state of collapse,” with 51 percent of children no longer attending school.⁷⁶

Syria's recovery will be complicated because of the large numbers of displaced persons and refugees, which may contribute to post-conflict instability.⁷⁷ Of Syria's estimated 22 million people, nearly half are refugees (4.8 million) or internally displaced persons (6.6 million).⁷⁸ The repercussions of refugee crises can be long lasting, with such crises historically lasting at least 25 years and refugees spending, on average, 17 years in exile before returning to their country of origin (if at all).⁷⁹

Given the toll of the Syrian war, postwar objectives will need to be limited and realistic. That said, to build popular support for reconstruction efforts, people must see an improvement in their

lives as a result of the transition. While some development economists have advocated fiscal and monetary austerity in postconflict states to contain inflation and reduce debt, others give urgency to short-term economic policies that return money to circulation and thus provide income.⁸⁰ A priority for Syria's postconflict transition should be the payment of public-sector wages and a monetary policy that allows as much hard currency to flow into the Syrian economy before corrective measures are required.⁸¹ Foreign assistance should support immediate development projects to rapidly reduce unemployment. Additional steps could include the unfreezing and transfer of foreign assets from abroad, lifting of economic sanctions, and forgiveness of international debt.

The Syrian state should be the focus of postconflict economic reconstruction and development. Reconstruction will also depend on external parties and will be near impossible if neighboring states seek to undermine the process.⁸² A UN Security Council mandate would convey urgency and priority and allow the mediation of international organization and donor institutions.⁸³ Such mediation would be more effective when a central state, rather than myriad local parties, is the focus of reconstruction efforts.⁸⁴

Postconflict Security

The ultimate determinant of success for any postconflict intervention or transition is security. A failure in security would jeopardize political and economic reform, as happened in Libya and Iraq.⁸⁵ Efforts to establish postconflict security should follow several guidelines.

First, there must be a structure for combatants to surrender their arms, with guarantees for the safety of opposition forces that agree to disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs.⁸⁶ France has suggested that combining Free Syrian Army and gov-

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ernment forces to fight the Islamic State could provide a needed ground element for combatting the terrorist group and would encourage rapprochement.⁸⁷ The international community will have to decide which organizations are allowed to commit troops to a new army and which will be required to disarm entirely. Similarly, social reconciliation and cohesion-building programs can also contribute to postconflict stability, but they depend on the investment of local and international parties in the process.⁸⁸

Second, the Syrian state should be the focus of postconflict security arrangements. Security reform could take years, possibly leading to a gap for security in some regions that were under the control of armed opposition groups. The empowerment of local governorates to provide security exclusive of the state, especially those in predominantly Sunni areas, could have the consequence of providing a safe haven for Salafi and jihadi groups, especially those that have cooperated with Nusra.⁸⁹ The deliberate rebuilding of a weak state, with zones outside of government control influenced by regional powers that have backed Salafi and jihadi groups would likely weaken, rather than strengthen, U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

In the end, an international stabilization force will require agreement by Russia, Iran, and Syria. Without Russian support, there can be no UN Security Council sanction for such a force.

The restructuring of Syrian security forces should therefore be done in coordination with—not in opposition to—Damascus and should happen inside out, rather than outside in, as would be the norm in most other postconflict countries. The content and pace of reform of Syria’s security forces will depend on the context and terms of a political settlement and, most importantly, whether Assad remains in power. If Syrian government forces achieve outright victory—as Colombian security forces have done over the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—then this approach would be the most straightforward. National forces would assume charge of rebel areas, and security forces would be restructured afterward. In the context of a political settlement or even a frozen conflict, armed groups might provide their own security until national forces are restructured. Given the territory currently held by the Syrian government and the trajectory of the conflict, it is likely that the territory controlled by groups other than the Islamic State will be minimal. Thus, it would also mean that the Syrian government, rather the opposition forces, will have veto over whether to participate in the reform of those security forces.

Third, given these challenges to security reform, a postconflict international stabilization force may be necessary. Such a force would require the consent of Russia, if it were to be sanctioned

by the UN Security Council and, by extension, Syria. We do not envision such a force until a transitional government is in place. Historically, UN forces have fared better than unilateral or non-UN sanctioned multilateral forces, even though they may at times be less trained or capable.⁹⁰ The lack of a stabilization force in Libya undermined postconflict stability and institution-building.⁹¹ The potential for vendetta killings and population expulsions in post-conflict states is well documented since Europe after World War II.⁹² Unless measures are taken to prevent it, such violence is possible given the brutality by all sides in the Syrian civil war and could be particularly acute in any territory regained from the Islamic State, as has been seen in Iraq.⁹³

Fourth, the composition of a stabilization force can influence its success. This may be especially relevant in Syria if a postconflict force is tasked with security in liberated areas. Foreign forces can have an unintentional destabilizing effect if there is popular resentment to their presence. While “UN efforts have had the best combination of low cost, success rate, and internal legitimacy,”⁹⁴ having troops on the ground from nations directly or indirectly involved in the conflict would raise local ire and be a source of instability and subversion, unless there is a dramatic change in regional attitudes. A foreign stabilization force would likely monitor cease-fire violations, facilitate humanitarian aid, and involve only states that have not been party to the conflict.⁹⁵

An international force could face armed irreconcilable elements, and its mission therefore could expand into counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. The eventual number of international forces required will depend on the territory that is under the control of the Syrian government at the time of the deployment. Promoting the rule of law can prove more difficult than designing constitutions

and holding elections. There may be questions about whether transitional justice should be led by the international community or the country itself.

In the end, an international stabilization force will require agreement by Iran, Russia, and Syria. Without Russian support, there can be no UN Security Council sanction for such a force. If Assad and his backers are intent on retaking “every inch” of Syrian territory, and have some sustained success in offensive campaigns in northern Syria, they will likely resist ceding control of Syrian territory to local or international forces that could be influenced or manipulated by his enemies. The balance of forces on the ground might ultimately be the final arbiter of the timing, terms, and viability of the political negotiations and cease-fire.

Conclusion

Postconflict Syria will likely be a weak state in a volatile region. While there is no simple solution to the problems the ongoing conflict poses, five possible policies can protect and advance U.S. interests in combatting terrorism and preventing state collapse in Syria.

First, there are advantages to the United States and Russia maintaining their roles as stewards of the diplomatic process. The United States has little to no diplomatic leverage with Syria and Iran; Russia has that leverage. The U.S.-Russian partnership, especially when working through the UN Security Council, can define the structures and constraints for the regional parties in Syria and provide legitimacy to an eventual postconflict stabilization and reconstruction plan. U.S.-Russia coordination beginning in late 2015 has facilitated UN Security Council Resolution 2254, the formation of the ISSG, the renewed intra-Syrian talks, the cessation of hostili-

ties, and renewed humanitarian aid. None of these achievements suffices to resolve the conflict, but all do underscore the advantage of this approach relative to alternatives.

Second, more extensive U.S. military and intelligence coordination with Russia against the Islamic State and Nusra, as was proposed by the Obama administration in 2016 and may be considered by the Trump administration, should also include holding Russia and its allies—Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria—accountable for any indiscriminate bombing or mistreatment of civilians. The United States could not be party, even indirectly, to the mass atrocities as occurred during the siege of Aleppo, even if the objective is the defeat and destruction of the Islamic State and Nusra. U.S. and Russian coordination also provides a UN Security Council imprimatur to continue to strengthen and enforce resolutions that sanction and penalize those entities and persons that provide any support to al Qaeda and the Islamic State.⁹⁶

Third, the United States should address Turkey’s concerns about the role of the Syrian Kurdish parties. The United States has so far sought to do so by making clear that it does not support a “separate entity on the Turkish border,” referring to any effort to connect the two Syrian Kurdish enclaves east and west of the Euphrates River.⁹⁷

To facilitate Turkish support for a postconflict settlement, the United States can encourage Turkey to resume talks with the PKK and encourage Russia and Iran to reduce their support for the PKK, make clear to all parties that the United States supports the territorial integrity of Syria and will accept no formal division of a Syrian Kurdish enclave beyond some form of minimal and negotiated autonomy, and make clear to the YPG that it will not support any PKK bases or action in northern Syria.⁹⁸

Fourth, the United States should resist any plans for the fragmentation or division of Syria. Postconflict “local governance” at the expense of the Syrian state could undermine prospects for long-term stabilization. The present conflict has taken on more identity-based overtones in part because of the influx of foreign fighters. This sectarian trend, driven by the war and its antagonists, need not and should not define the postconflict reality.⁹⁹ Such an outcome would be unnecessary, unfortunate, and ultimately self-defeating, given Syrian conceptions of nationalism.¹⁰⁰

Fifth and finally: Assad is not the Syrian state; rather, the Syrian state rests on a legacy of central institutions and national identity. Pursuing approaches to postconflict reconstruction and security that seek yet another work-around of the Syrian state could readily create openings for the Islamic State, al Qaeda, the Syrian Conquest Coalition, or future terrorist organizations.

Although the United States may be willing to defer the question of Assad’s fate to further U.S.-Russian collaboration to defeat terrorist groups and seek an end to the war, Washington may be unlikely to shepherd international postconflict stabilization efforts with Assad in control.¹⁰¹ Assad’s transition, therefore, could be the price of a regional consensus and the necessary leverage for the United States to provide the needed leadership and assistance to international postconflict stabilization to prevent Syrian state collapse, which should be in the interests of all parties.

Notes

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Possible War Crimes,” UN News Centre, December 22, 2016. As of December 28, 2016:

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² The Islamic State is sometimes referred to by the acronyms “IS,” “ISIL,” and “ISIS” and the transliterated Arabic acronym *Daesh*. In July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra changed its name to the “Front for the Conquest of Syria,” saying that it had cut its ties with al Qaeda, a claim that was rejected by the U.S. government and most observers. In this Perspective, we refer to both Jabhat al-Nusra and Syrian Conquest Front interchangeably. “Terrorist groups” refer to those entities formally designated as such by the UN, including the Islamic State and al Qaeda and its affiliates, including Jabhat al-Nusra.

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⁷ James R. Clapper, “Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community: Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” February 9, 2016. As of May 8, 2016:

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⁸ “Statement by Director Brennan as Prepared for Delivery Before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” Central Intelligence Agency website, June 16, 2016. As of June 17, 2016:

<https://www.cia.gov/news-information/speeches-testimony/2016-speeches-testimony/statement-by-director-brennan-as-prepared-for-delivery-before-ssci.html>

⁹ Cited in “Jabhat al-Nusra ‘al-Qaeda’s Largest Formal Affiliate in History,’” *Al-Monitor*, July 10, 2016. As of August 23, 2016:

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¹⁰ John Kerry, “Remarks with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at a Press Availability,” U.S. Department of State, August 26, 2016.

¹¹ The Islamic State is an off-shoot of al Qaeda. See Daniel Byman, “Will ISIS and al-Qaida Always Be Rivals?” *Slate*, May 27, 2016. As of May 29, 2016: http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2016/05/isis_and_al_qaida_are_fighting_each_other_in_syria_what_happens_if_they.html

¹² See Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: RAND Counterinsurgency Study*, Vol. 4, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-595-OSD, April 2008.

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⁶⁵ Office of the Vice President, “Remarks by Vice President Biden and President Erdogan of Turkey in a Pool Spray,” White House, August 25, 2016.

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⁹¹ Chivvis and Martini, 2014, p. 75.

⁹² Lowe, 2012.

⁹³ See Dobbins, Gordon, and Martini, 2015.

⁹⁴ Davis, ed., 2011, p. 324; Michael W. Doyle and Nicolas Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace: United Nations Peace Operations*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006.

⁹⁵ No one, for instance, would have considered putting Pakistani troops as peacekeepers in Afghanistan for many of these same reasons. Candidates for peacekeeping operations in Syria could be troops from the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Egypt, which were not parties to the Syrian war, have participated in other peacekeeping assignments, and have a demonstrated record of relative military professionalism.

⁹⁶ See “UN Security Council Resolution 1267 (1999),” U.S. Department of State, October 15, 1999; “Security Council Adopts Resolution 2170 (2014) Condemning Gross, Widespread Abuse of Human Rights by Extremist Groups in Iraq, Syria,” United Nations, August 14, 2014; “Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution Condemning Violent Extremism, Underscoring Need to Prevent Travel, Support for Foreign Terrorist Fighters,” United Nations, September 24, 2014; “Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2199 (2015), Security Council Condemns Trade with Al-Qaida Associated Groups, Threatens Further Targeted Sanctions,” United Nations, February 12, 2015; and “Resolution 2249: Adopted by the Security Council at Its 7565th Meeting,” November 20, 2015, as of January 30, 2016. Resolutions 1267, 2170, 2178, and 2199 were passed under chapter

VII of the UN, which authorizes the Security Council to consider both military and nonmilitary action, such as sanctions, to maintain peace and respond to aggression. See, also, “U.S. Should Accept Russian Offer to Coordinate Strikes on Jabhat Al-Nusra,” *Al-Monitor*, May 22, 2016. As of December 7, 2016: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/us-russia-nusra-syria-terrorism-al-qaeda-nasrallah.html>

⁹⁷ “Biden’s Diplomatic Triage in Turkey,” *Al-Monitor*, August 28, 2016. As of August 28, 2016:

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/biden-diplomatic-triage-turkey-syria-policy-iran.html>

⁹⁸ Many of these points, and others, are well made in International Crisis Group, “Steps Toward Stabilising Syria’s Northern Border,” Crisis Group Middle East Briefing No. 49, April 8, 2016.

⁹⁹ An additional caution comes from South Sudan, which was meant to be a problem solved by partition based on religion. A short two years after independence, South Sudan was in the middle of a civil war, as people who had managed to unite briefly quickly found other lines along which to divide themselves.

¹⁰⁰ See “Syrian Endgame Could Begin with Aleppo,” 2016; Cyrus Malik, “Washington’s Sunni Myth and the Civil Wars in Syria and Iraq,” *War on the Rocks*, August 16, 2016. As of August 23, 2016:

<http://warontherocks.com/2016/08/washingtons-sunni-myth-and-the-civil-wars-in-syria-and-iraq>

and “Amnesty Report: Abductions, Torture, and Summary Killings at the Hands of Armed Groups in Syria,” 2016.

¹⁰¹ James Dobbins, comment during review of this report, July 5, 2016.

About This Perspective

This Perspective offers recommendations for U.S. policy for a postconflict transition in Syria that prevents state collapse, reduces the potential for the recurrence of war, and defeats terrorist groups that have taken hold in the country. These three objectives, we suggest, are best achieved by working with Russia and through the United Nations Security Council, especially in the absence of a regional consensus to end the war. Furthermore, Syria's political culture and modern history reflect a tradition of centralization and nationalism, which should be acknowledged in postconflict planning. In contrast, policies that seek to divide the country or deliberately or inadvertently weaken or destabilize state institutions—such as support for armed groups that carry out attacks against the state or postconflict governance and reconstruction plans that overemphasize local governance at the expense of the state—may ultimately prove counterproductive in preventing a return to conflict and violence.

The analysis and recommendations presented in this paper should be of interest to policymakers, media, and scholars who specialize in U.S. foreign policy, Syria, and the Middle East.

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